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It is important to acknowledge that the level of this discussion was personal and individual. The women in these focus groups were not asked about social welfare policy or about fatherhood programming and practice per se. However, as stated previously, the personal does inform the political and, as such, the first-hand insights of these women into the barriers fathers face, the ways in which gender roles, racism, slavery, and social systems have historically kept men from their families and required that women head households, and suggestions for overcoming these challenges, provide a platform for WIFI's work.

In addition, often these "personal" issues can develop into political zero sum gains—giving the appearance that women do not see the importance of fathers or that the needs of mothers and fathers are at odds. Yet providing services for men and supporting the father-child relationship need not compete against the interests of mothers, as mothers and children stand to benefit too when fathers are enabled to actively engage in the material and social support of their children. Our hope is that the words of the women we engaged demonstrate that diverse women can share in the collective mission of supporting father involvement. Discussing and implementing this support

is, however, complex, underscoring the need for leadership by an organization like WIFI to echo the essential voices of women when shaping research, policy, and practice that affect fathers, mothers, children and their communities.

Acknowledgements

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Fatherhood in the Words of Women: Essential Voices. Collective Mission.

This is the first in a series of briefs that draws upon WIFI's focus group findings conducted with diverse groups of women from across the country and online. The groups varied by socio-economic status, age, race/ethnicity, and profession. This series of briefs explores and expands upon what women believed to be the major issues around fatherhood including, barriers and solutions to father involvement, and the benefits of father involvement to children, women, and communities. For the full report with detailed methodology, please visit www.womeninfatherhood.org.

Introduction

Women in Fatherhood, Inc. (WIFI) is an organization committed to supporting positive father involvement in the lives of families, children and communities and to increasing the role of women within the fatherhood field and fatherhood programming. Through our work, WIFI brings the essential voices of women into the national conversation around fatherhood for several critical reasons:

- The voices and perspective of women provides an important contribution to the responsible fatherhood movement and helps it to sustain and continue its growth and effectiveness.
- The voices of women expand the traditionally male-dominated fatherhood conversation to ensure that the interests of women and mothers are included along with the interests of fathers.
- The voices of women bring more groups, policies and programs to the fatherhood discussion and, through collaboration and partnership can expand the focus to the issue of men in families and communities.
- The voices of women, when represented authentically and from the standpoint and experiences of diverse groups of women, provide a platform for WIFI's work to support and encourage men, women, and families and to diminish social inequality and disregard.

This background briefing report is WIFI's first in a series of issue briefs that draws upon the findings from focus groups conducted by WIFI in the spring and fall of 2008.

Background

In our society, it has been less problematic to foster and support motherhood and the connection between mothers and children due to a number of factors that are both biological and social. Indeed, fatherhood is less complex when marriage defines and encompasses men's parenthood. However, over the last fifty years this country has seen increased rates of divorce, and non-marital childbirth. Approximately one in three births in the United States occur outside of marriage and the current national divorce rate, while recently decreasing, is still cause for concern. Because there has not been an equal, reactive change of law or social customs, our society has more difficulty defining and supporting fatherhood—particularly for noncustodial fathers--making it critical for fatherhood advocates to find ways to keep children engaged with both parents.

Women have been engaged in supporting responsible fatherhood as researchers, practitioners, policymakers, advocates and mothers for decades. In the early 1990s, women participated in meetings between fatherhood grantees and women's advocates from the Domestic Violence, Anti-poverty, and Women's Law communities initiated by Dr. Ronald Mincy, then a program officer at the Ford Foundation. The meetings were intended to explore ways to more fully incorporate the voices of women in this developing field. In December 2005, the Annie E. Casey Foundation continued these efforts by convening a meeting of men and women working in responsible fatherhood to assess the influence women were having in the field. After extensive consultations with experts in the field, the

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group found a high level of need for an organized effort of women to provide a unique and necessary voice for:

- Effective advocacy and support of responsible fatherhood in program and policy;
- Fatherhood awareness, education, legislation, and policy initiatives, which benefit from the input of mothers and other women; and
- Effective programs designed to involve fathers, of which the perspective of mothers and their advocates is essential to their success.

This led to the formation of Women In Fatherhood—A diverse group of women dedicated to advancing the responsible fatherhood field through public awareness and education, policy advocacy, research, and collaboration. It is important to note that our interest in fatherhood does not contradict the value we place on the welfare of children, mothers, and families. In fact, it is in each of these specific interests that we find the importance of father involvement for children.

Despite the work of Foundations like Ford and Casey, and the significant contributions of women to the fatherhood field, ongoing controversy and tension exists between women’s advocates and fatherhood advocates. These tensions have led to the pervasive belief that many women hold primarily negative opinions of the fathers of their children and the value of the father’s role in the family. WIFI felt it was our responsibility to talk with women to discern their authentic views and to report what they said with regard to fathers and men in all its vitality and complexity.

In the Words of Women...

In the spring and fall of 2008, WIFI brought the collective and essential voices of 227 women into the national conversation around fatherhood by conducting a series of focus group discussions and qualitative surveys with diverse groups of women from across the country. These focus groups were organized in coordination with state and local maternal and child health, domestic violence, healthy relationships and marriage, homeless and fatherhood organizations.

The purpose of this research was to explore women’s perspectives on fathers and father involvement. Specifically, we asked: 1) What are women’s views on fathers and father involvement?; 2) What are women’s perceptions of barriers to father involvement?; and 3) In what ways do women think positive father involvement can be supported?

Methods

A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the focus groups. The focus groups took place from June to October, 2008. There were fifteen one-hour focus group discussions held in Connecticut, Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, and Maryland. A total of 101 women participated in one of the fifteen focus groups. The participants were given consent and demographic data forms to review and complete prior to the focus group. The consent

forms requested permission for audiotaping and addressed the confidentiality responsibilities of the facilitators and participants. Each focus group was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis of the fifteen focus group transcripts was used to identify recurrent themes, across and within groups, and categorize participants’ responses in a grid according to question.

The sample for the online survey was obtained by sending a recruitment letter to professional colleagues and organizations. The survey data collection began in December 2008 with a total of 126 women having participated. A 21-item open response questionnaire was designed to elicit the perspectives of women on fathers and father involvement. The survey questions were the same as those posed in the focus group discussions.

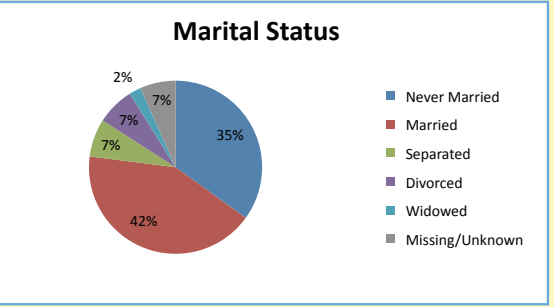
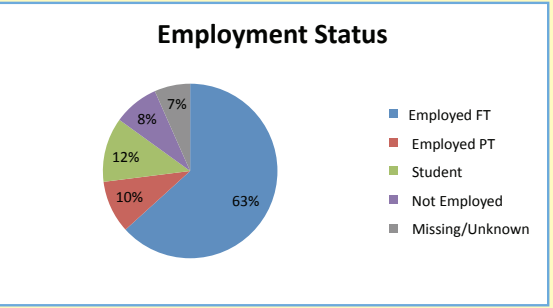
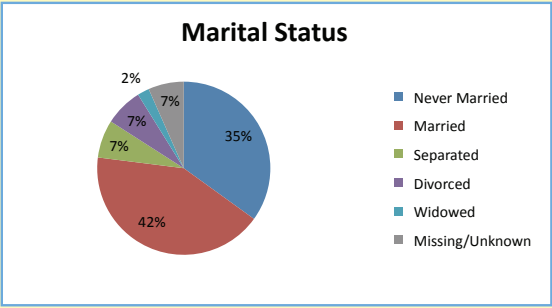
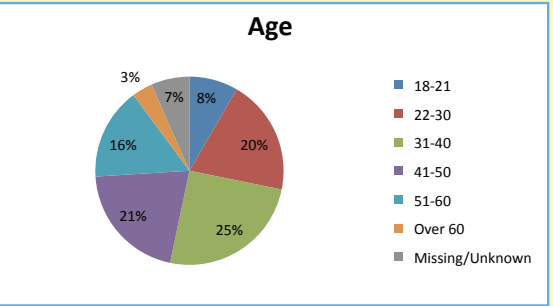
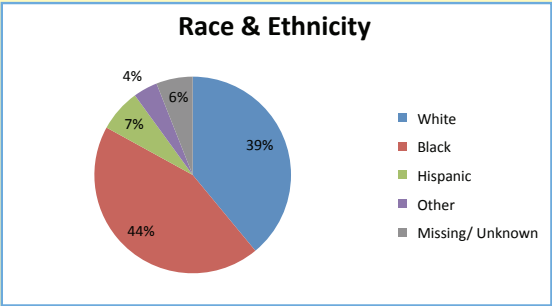
Findings

Results of the focus groups and surveys revealed the following major themes that will be expanded upon as distinct up-coming WIFI issue briefs:

1. Fathers’ physical and emotional support for their children matter as much to the well-being of children as their financial support.
2. Fathers face multiple, significant barriers to engaging responsibly with their children and families, and should receive assistance that will help them better their lives and their involvement in their children’s lives.
3. Responsible Fatherhood extends beyond biological children; responsible fathers are important citizens in their communities, and a source of “strength” as “role models,” and protectors.
4. For female practitioners, there are unique dynamics, rewards, challenges, knowledge and skills involved with providing services to fathers.

A Platform for WIFI’s Work

Finally, women made a number of recommendations to WIFI specifically regarding our role as an organization in supporting fathers and increasing positive father involvement: increasing public awareness, improving public sentiment toward fathers and fatherhood, impacting policies that create barriers for fathers to be involved in the lives of their children and increasing services for fathers. Participants felt that making the public more aware of the issues fathers’ face, while also letting fathers know that their positive involvement is needed and important should be a task for WIFI. Specifically, educating mothers and law professionals about the importance of father involvement was noted as a worthy endeavor for the organization. Other suggestions included helping to create and change laws and policies that impact fathers and also helping to create services and resources for men. The women in the focus groups particularly noted that WIFI should communicate with men about what they feel WIFI should do to help them in their efforts to be involved with their children.



The Personal is the Political

The perspective of women is an essential element in the conversation on the personal and political issues of fatherhood, family, and community. However, the intent of this document is not to define or support the position of WIFI, or, indeed, of any group, organization, or agency. Rather, our clear intention is to bring the voices, in their own words, of these individual women of various ages, income level, ethnicities, and communities into the conversation. To that end, in the subsequent issue briefs derived from this larger research project, we will take the concerns, desires and recommendations voiced by the women we interviewed and frame them within the context of national and local policy and program opportunities, as it was apparent that these women experience and understand that multiple barriers impact father involvement, particularly fathers that do not reside in the home with their children. Issues such as low education, unemployment, psychological disorders, and parental conflict were all highlighted as challenges that must be addressed to support a father’s ability to contribute to his children’s well being. In addition, women also

pointed out that fathers who live in the home with their children can be restricted by long work hours, traditional gender roles, and societal images that make them feel as if they only have to provide financially for their children. These women overwhelmingly noted that fathers should be involved emotionally and physically as well.

Conclusions

What we heard from the women we interviewed was that the role of fathers is to be present, cooperative, and contributive. The women expressed some anger and frustration against individual men, and against structures and systems. They also expressed anxiety about outcomes for their children and their communities in the absence of positive father involvement. However, there was a positive expression of their belief in the importance of men’s contribution to families and communities, and most women expressed their willingness to support and encourage that contribution. In fact, most respondents offered ideas for supportive services for men in their communities and emphasized the need for father involvement in children’s lives, and to include fathers in family services.

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